

## THE TENANT OF THE CEDARS.

BY MARY E. PENN.

"TO be let, furnished, by the month or year, The Cedars, a pretty rustic cottage, delightfully situated in Ranstone Park, Berkshire, with right of fishing in the trout stream. For particulars, apply to Mr. Newton, House Agent, Reading."

This advertisement arrested my attention as I, Percival Wilford, barrister-at-law, glanced over the columns of the *Times* one August morning, ten or twelve years ago.

It seemed like an answer to the question I had been deliberating as I sat at breakfast in my dull Temple chambers—namely, where should I spend the Long Vacation? I had reached that sedate period of life when one begins to realise that "there is no joy but calm," and my ideal of a holiday retreat was some quiet, leafy nook where I could read and dream, and "go a-fishing," and forget for a time that such things as briefs existed. I may add that I had only my own tastes to consult in the matter, having the misfortune (to which I am perfectly resigned) to be a bachelor. I made a note of the advertisement, and resolved to run down to the place next day and see whether it answered to its attractive description.

Accordingly, on the following afternoon I took train to Reading, and walked thence to the village of Ranstone, which consisted of one long, up-hill street, beginning with a blacksmith's forge and ending with a barn. Midway between them stood an inn: The Golden Sheaf. Feeling somewhat fatigued by a five-mile walk along dusty country roads, I turned into this hostelry to refresh myself with a glass of ale, and enquire my way. The landlord, a red-faced burly man, in shirt-sleeves and a white apron, seemed puzzled by my question.

"The Cedars!" he repeated; "oh—I understand, sir. You mean the little thatched house in the park. We call it 'Ranstone's Folly.'"

"Why 'Folly?'" I queried.

"Well, sir, because it's a fanciful sort of place, and was built for a whim. Sir Richard Ranstone, the father of the present baronet, designed it himself when a young man, and used to shut himself up there to scribble poetry. Since his death it has been let from time to time, but not often. Such a lonesome, out-of-the-way place don't suit everyone."

"I fancy it will just suit me," I remarked.

My host scanned me curiously as he set down the glass at my elbow. "Perhaps you're in the poetical line yourself, sir?" he suggested.

I laughed, and assured him that my "line" was nothing half so agreeable; and when I had finished, paid for my modest refreshment, and set off hopefully on my way.

It led through the village and along the high road, and in about ten minutes I came to the ivy-covered park wall, which was pleasantly shaded by trees.

Presently I found myself opposite the lodge-gates, my summons at which was answered by a neat, comely woman of middle-age, to whom I explained my errand, and exhibited my credentials in the shape of the house-agent's card.

"The cottage is right on the other side of the park, sir, close to the stream," she said, as she admitted me. "I'm sorry I can't show you the way, but Foster's out, and I've no one to leave. However, you can't miss it if you keep to that path," pointing to one which branched off to the right of the main avenue. "There's a man living in charge who will show you over the house."

"Has it been long unlet?" I enquired.

"Nigh upon three years. The last tenant only lived there six months—a lady named Lestelle."

"That is a French name?"

"Yes, sir, she was French, and had been a singer, I believe."

"Lestelle," I repeated thoughtfully; "was it Léonie Lestelle, I wonder, who took the town by storm a few seasons ago? But that is hardly probable."

"What was she like, sir?" my companion enquired, looking interested. "Young and pretty?"

"More than pretty. She had one of the loveliest faces I ever saw, and a voice that matched it."

"It must be the same," Mrs. Foster exclaimed; "that's just her description. A beautiful young lady she was, and so gentle and sweet-spoken it was a pleasure to serve her."

"But what brought her to The Cedars?" I questioned. "When she disappeared from London society about four years ago, it was supposed that she had returned to France. Was she living alone?"

"Quite alone, except for the servants—an elderly woman who did the housework, and a man named Underwood who attended to the garden and went of errands. It's him that's been living in charge of the house for the last two years. He used to be one of the under-gardeners at the Hall, but was dismissed because he was always quarrelling with the other men. A sullen, ill-conditioned fellow he is—though I ought not to say so, perhaps, as he's a cripple and deformed," she added, with compunction. "He has a hard life of it."

"How came Mademoiselle Lestelle to take him into her service?"

"It was out of kindness, sir, because no one else would employ him. Her patience and sweetness conquered even him. I believe he worshipped the ground she trod upon, and he was like one frantic when she was—when she died."

I started. "What—is she dead?" I asked.

My companion looked at me in surprise. "Didn't you know, sir? Did you never hear?"

"I have heard nothing of her since she gave up her profession. What was the cause of her death?"

Before she could reply the sound of a horse approaching rapidly up the road made her glance towards the gates. "It's Sir Philip," she said, hurriedly, and ran forward to open them.

The baronet was a tall, distinguished-looking man, of two or three and thirty, with handsome, haughty features, bold dark eyes, and full red lips half hidden by a sweeping moustache. A striking face, but scarcely an attractive one. There was something at once hard and sensual about it that repelled me. He was mounted on a handsome chestnut mare, whose panting, foam-flecked sides showed that she had been mercilessly ridden. Apparently the exercise had not improved her owner's temper. Slight as was the delay in admitting him, he abused the woman for keeping him waiting. He was riding on when, perceiving me, he drew rein.

"The gentleman has called to see the cottage," Mrs. Foster explained.

"What cottage?" he asked, absently.

"The Cedars, Sir Philip."

He slightly nodded, and acknowledging my salute by touching the brim of his hat with his whip, jerked the bridle, and rode on up the avenue, followed by his dogs. Mrs. Foster looked after her master's retreating figure with no great favour.

"He needn't have sworn at me," she muttered, resentfully. "I was as quick as I could be. But he's in one of his moods to-day, and makes everyone suffer for it. Ah—I wouldn't be in my lady's shoes for all her grandeur. They've only been married a couple of years, but already ——"

A significant shake of the head finished the sentence.

"Who was Lady Ranstone?" I asked.

"She was the daughter and heiress of Mr. Goldney, the great banker. She's a nice lady, but no beauty, and several years older than Sir Philip. It's pretty well known that he married her for her money, being over head and ears in debt, thanks to his —— . But I really beg your pardon, sir," she broke off, becoming suddenly conscious of her indiscretion. "I ought not to detain you with my gossip. If Underwood is not indoors, you'll find him somewhere in the garden—reading, most likely. He's quite a scholar, in his way. Good afternoon, sir, and a pleasant walk."

I nodded to her, and went my way down the path she had indicated, which traversed the whole width of the park; winding across sunny glades, and ferny hollows, and under the shade of "immemorial elms," between whose branches I caught glimpses of the Hall, a stately modern building in the Italian style.

At length, emerging from a young oak plantation, I came unexpectedly upon the stream—which at this point was both broad and deep—and on the slope of the opposite bank stood The Cedars.

It was a picturesque rustic pavilion, with a high, thatched roof, whose overhanging ledge, supported on pillars, formed a verandah, on to which the lower windows opened. Behind it the trees clustered closely, and the garden in front sloped to the edge of the stream, which was spanned by a light rustic bridge. I crossed it, and passed through a wicket gate into the garden, which was in beautiful order; the parterres a mass of brilliant bloom, the grass-plot like green velvet.

It was not till I was close to the house that I perceived the figure of the custodian, who was seated in the verandah.

He was a man of from thirty-five to forty, with rugged strongly-marked features, and melancholy dark eyes. His figure, though mis-shapen, was vigorous and muscular, and there was a look of suppressed power about him which suggested hidden reserves of force, both mental and physical. I had ample time to make these observations, for he did not seem to notice my approach, nor did he reply when I addressed him.

There was a book in his hand, a well-worn volume of Shakespeare, but he was not reading. He sat in a listening attitude, with head upraised and lips apart, his foot gently beating the ground, as if in time to music. Involuntarily I listened, too, but heard nothing except the lonely murmur of the breeze, and the distant forlorn note of a wood-pigeon. At length I touched his arm. He sprang to his feet, staring at me with vague alarm.

"I am sorry I startled you, but you did not hear me speak," I said. "Will you ——"

"How long have you been watching me?" he interrupted, brusquely.

"I have but this moment come," I returned. "I wish to look over the house."

He hesitated; and seemed half inclined to refuse me admission, but thinking better of it, nodded, and limped on before me to the door, drawing back to allow me to pass in. I found myself in a small tiled entrance hall, with doors on either hand. He threw open the one to the left, and ushered me into a dusky, low room, furnished in a style of quaint simplicity, which suited the character of the house.

"This is what they call Sir Richard's study," he explained. "The parlour across the hall is the same size, but better furnished. I can't show it you, for the door's locked, and—and I've mislaid the key."

His hesitation convinced me that he was telling an untruth; for some reason of his own he did not wish me to see the room. However, I only said quietly: "I think I noticed that the window was open; we can go in that way."

He reluctantly followed me, and stood outside as I entered

through the long window, which opened, like a door, upon the verandah.

The room in which I found myself was as great a contrast to the one I had just quitted as could well be imagined. With its polished floor and panelled walls; its light but elegant furniture, its crowd of dainty ornaments, and general look of airy brightness, it might have been transported bodily from a Parisian "Appartement." But I noticed with surprise, that it seemed to have been recently occupied by a lady. There were fresh flowers in the vases; music on the open piano, books on the table, and a work-basket, with a strip of embroidery, which seemed to have been just thrown down. I hastily drew back, and turned to my companion.

"I understood that the house was unoccupied," I said. "Why did you not tell me ——"

"There is no one here except myself," he interrupted.

"Then, to whom do these belong?" I enquired, pointing to the books and music.

"To no one in particular. They did belong to a lady who lived here for a time three years ago, but she's dead."

"You mean Mademoiselle Lestelle?"

He nodded, slowly passing his hand across his forehead.

"But how came they to be left here? Did no one claim them, after her death—no friend or relative?"

"She had no near relations, and few friends in this country. I have heard her say that she would leave no one to regret her. But she was mistaken there," he muttered.

I looked at him curiously. There was something in his face that attracted me, in spite of its harsh lines.

"You, at least, will not soon forget her, I am sure?" I said, after a pause. His lips curved in a smile half sad, half bitter.

"I have not so many friends that I can afford to forget that one. I suppose I may claim the dog's virtue—fidelity, if no other. I know that I would gladly have died upon her grave," he added, in a low tone of suppressed but passionate feeling which was a revelation to me. The next moment, however, he broke into a short laugh.

"You may well look astonished to hear such a romantic sentiment from 'Caliban,' as Sir Philip calls me. Sounds grotesque from my lips, doesn't it, sir?"

"You need not fear ridicule from me," I said, quietly. "I understand your feeling, and respect it."

He gave me a half-incredulous look, as if sympathy were something new to him. Then his face changed and softened, and with a quick impulsive movement he put out his hand.

"Thank you, sir—that's kindly spoken," he said, earnestly. "I'm sorry I told you a falsehood about the key—for it was a falsehood. I have it in my pocket. But—but this room, where she spent so many hours, is sacred to me; so sacred, that it seems sacrilege for a

stranger to enter it." He paused, looking round reverently, as if it were indeed a sanctuary.

"I have kept it just as it was when—when last she used it," he continued, in a low dreamy tone, speaking to himself more than to me. "I can almost fancy I see her bending over her book, or singing softly to herself as she worked. What a voice she had! It seemed to draw the heart out of my body. She used to let me sit in the verandah when she was singing, and she'd talk to me between whiles in her pretty broken English. She'd always a word and a smile for 'Jacques,' as she called me—always as gentle and courteous she was as if I'd been her friend and equal, instead of her servant. Ah! She was the sweetest soul that ever ——"

His voice broke; he hastily turned his head aside.

"I've got her portrait—the last she had taken, if you would like to see it," he resumed, after a moment, and took it from a worn leather pocket-book. It was the vignette photograph of a lovely girl of one or two and twenty, with a delicate, spiritual face, framed in cloudy dark hair; a sweet sorrowful mouth, and soft steadfast dark eyes.

"It is very like her," was my comment.

"Ah—you knew her?" he questioned, eagerly.

"No, but I have heard her sing more than once. Her face had not this sorrowful look when I saw her last. What was her trouble, I wonder? Did she ever speak of her past life?"

"No—yes. She sometimes talked of her childhood, when her parents were living."

"But not of her later years? She did not tell you why she gave up her profession?"

"She was not likely to take me into her confidence," he rejoined, evasively, and added, as if to avoid further questions: "Perhaps you would like to see the other rooms now?" And without waiting for my reply, he crossed the hall and led the way upstairs.

Before my tour of inspection was over, I had resolved to become the temporary tenant of The Cedars. Underwood received the announcement of my decision in silence.

"I suppose I shall have to turn out when you take possession?" he said at last, glancing at me half-wistfully.

"Not unless you are disinclined to remain as my servant," I replied.

"I shall be only too glad to stay, sir, and I'll do my best to please you," he responded. "I don't know whether you intend to bring a woman-servant with you; but, if not, I dare say Mrs. Foster, at the lodge, could recommend one."

"I will speak to her on my way back, and you may expect to see me this day week."

I slipped a coin into his hand, and we parted.

## II.

A WEEK later I found myself once more entering the gates of Ranstone Park, having left my "traps" to be sent after me from Reading.

The evening was grey, moist, and cool. Rain had fallen in the morning, and the air was still charged with the sweet pastoral scent of wet earth and grass. "Autumn's fiery finger" had not yet touched the leaves, and the woods wore a green as fresh and rich as if the month had been June instead of August.

To come straight from the dust and turmoil of town to these sylvan solitudes was almost like being transported to another planet. The walk was so pleasant that I was half sorry when it was over, and I saw before me the solitary pavilion, with the woods behind it and the stream at its feet. I was received at the door by Mrs. Foster and a pleasant, fresh-faced young woman, whom she introduced as her niece.

"Martha can't be spared from home altogether, sir," she explained, "but she'll be here early every morning, and I think you'll find her a good cook. She's given the house a thorough cleaning, all but the drawing-room. Underwood has fastened the window and locked the door, and won't let her set foot in it. I really think the man is going out of his mind," she continued, following me into the study, where the cloth was laid for my solitary dinner. "Just look at him now, sir."

She pointed through the window to where the gardener was standing in the side-walk. He had paused in the act of pruning a rose-bush, and seemed to be listening intently to some sound proceeding from the lower end of the walk.

"He'll stand in that way for ten minutes together, listening to nothing," she whispered. "It gives me a creepy feeling to look at him. People do say that the cottage is haunted, and that he ——"

"Nonsense!" I interrupted; "he is evidently subject to some delusion. Have you any idea what it is?"

She shook her head, and was silent a moment, thoughtfully watching him. "He has never been the same man since that dreadful affair three years ago," she resumed, at length.

"What are you speaking of?"

She coloured and bit her lips. "I ought not to have mentioned it, as it may set you against the house—however, I dare say you would have heard of it from someone else. I mean the murder of Mademoiselle Lestelle."

"What!" I exclaimed, in horror. "Do you mean to say that she was murdered?"

"In this very house, on the night of the first of September, three years ago."

"Good heavens!—By whom?"

"That is a mystery to this hour. She was in the habit of sitting up rather late to practice her music, and that night Underwood, who was in bed, but not asleep, noticed that she broke off suddenly in the middle of a song. He thought it strange, and after waiting a few moments, threw on his clothes, and hurried downstairs. He found the poor young lady lying in a pool of her own blood—dead. She had been stabbed in the back as she sat at the piano. The window was open, and there were foot-prints in the garden, but the murderer, whoever it was, had had time to get clear away, and has never been traced from that day to this."

"What was supposed to be the motive of the crime?—robbery?"

"No, nothing was stolen; that's the mysterious part of it. You may think that Sir Philip was dreadfully shocked at such a thing happening on his estate. He himself offered a reward for information, but ——"

"Was no one even suspected at the time?" I interrupted.

My companion hesitated. "Well—one person was, sir."

"Who was that?"

She pointed to the gardener. I looked at her incredulously.

"Impossible!" I exclaimed. "Underwood—who was so devotedly attached to her!"

"Many people think he has madness in his blood," she whispered; "and it's well known that madmen often turn against the very person they love best when in their right senses. You see we have only his own account of what took place that night, for the house-keeper neither saw nor heard anything. The foot-prints may have been a cunning device to avert suspicion. Heaven forbid that I should accuse him wrongfully," she added in conclusion, "but everyone has noticed that since it happened, he has been like a man bewitched."

When she had left the room I stood for a moment, watching the gardener; then opened the window, and crossed the lawn to his side. He stood in the same attitude, with a rapt, ecstatic look on his face, as if he were listening to the "music of the spheres." He turned towards me as I approached, but did not appear to recognise me till I spoke.

"Day-dreaming again, Underwood?" I said. "It seems to be a habit of yours?"

He passed his hand over his forehead, as if to rouse himself, and pushed back his cap.

"A very stupid one. I must try to cure myself of it," he replied with a constrained smile.

"What were you listening to just now?" I asked point-blank.

He resumed his task, and made no reply.

"Why will you not tell me?"

"Because, if I did, you would think me mad."



"Delusion is not necessarily a sign of insanity," I said after a moment's pause. "Your delusion—if you have one—may arise from disordered nerves, or ——"

"I have no delusion," he interrupted. "My senses are quickened to hear a sound which is inaudible to others—that's all."

"What is the sound?" I persisted; but again there was no reply. I changed the subject.

"I hear that you have the key of the drawing-room; please to give it me."

He took it from his pocket at once, and handed it to me, muttering something about not wishing the things to be "meddled with."

"Nothing need be moved, for I don't intend to use that room," I replied; "but I should prefer to keep the key."

He looked up quickly. "Ah! they have told you, I see."

"Yes, I have been told what happened there," I assented, looking him full in the face. He met my eyes steadily, his lips curving in a slow, sardonic smile.

"Perhaps you know that I was suspected of the crime?"

"Unjustly, I am sure," I replied, speaking my conviction; for I could detect no shadow of guilty consciousness in the man's face: only bitterness and melancholy.

"How can you be sure of it? I may be a madman and a murderer for all you know to the contrary," he retorted with a short, brusque laugh. Then, with one of his sudden changes of manner, he threw down his knife, and turned upon me almost fiercely.

"Does a man destroy what he adores? I worshipped her—I would have died for her. And it was me—me! they accused of taking her innocent life. Fools that they were!"

With a passionate gesture of his clenched hands he turned from me and limped hurriedly away down the path. I saw no more of him that evening, but he occupied a large share of my thoughts, both then and in the days which followed. His presence seemed to add to the uncanny sort of fascination which the place possessed for me—something which at once repelled and attracted my imagination.

Yet if the place were haunted, it seemed haunted by nothing more terrible than the gracious memory of its late tenant, which pervaded every room, like a lingering echo, or a sweet faint perfume, giving it a melancholy and mysterious charm.

A fortnight passed away in uneventful tranquillity. I took long walks in the pleasant Berkshire lanes; angled in the stream, lounged in the garden, and spent quiet evenings with my books.

I had seen nothing more of my landlord (a circumstance which I hardly regretted), and my only connection with the outer world was through my cheerful and obliging little maid, who brought my letters and papers every morning, and regaled me with scraps of village gossip. I should thoroughly have enjoyed this "lotos-eating" exist-

ence but for the feeling of languor and depression which clung to me. For the first time in my life I was conscious of "nerves." I felt restless and ill-at-ease, and my sleep was disturbed by troubled dreams from which I woke, "in the dead waste and middle of the night," trembling with some nameless fear.

One night when I had started awake in this uncomfortable fashion, finding it impossible to compose myself to sleep again, I half dressed, lighted a cigar, and took my seat near the open window. The night was sultry and still. The moon had set, but the sky was full of stars, and their faint, diffused light showed me the garden, the stream, and the shadowy park beyond. The murmur of running water, scarcely heard by day, was distinctly audible in the silence, and now and then a languid breeze charged with the sweet aromatic odour which the sleeping earth breathes forth, just stirred the leaves and died away. Was it in the magical stillness of such a night as this, I wondered, that Léonie Lestelle had sung her last song—that song which was never finished?

Her face rose up before me with strange distinctness, and I seemed to be listening once more to the clear, silvery sweet tones of her exquisite voice, which had a tender thrill, like the wooing note of a dove. I recollected that when last I heard her sing—it was a private concert at Lady A——’s—she had chosen Beethoven’s "*Per pietà non dirmi addio!*" The words haunted me, their musical syllables setting themselves to the murmur of the breeze and the ripple of the stream.

I do not know how long I had been sitting thus when I was roused from my reverie by another sound, coming from the room beneath—the key of which had been in my own possession since the day of my arrival. It did not at once arrest my attention, but stole upon me so gradually that I could not have told at what moment I first heard it. I turned from the window and listened.

Was I dreaming, I asked myself bewilderedly, or did I hear the faint sweet tones of a woman’s voice singing the very song which haunted my memory? I started to my feet, and for a moment stood transfixed, paralysed, by a fear such as I had never before experienced. Recovering myself by an effort I took up the night-lamp and left the room.

I noiselessly descended the stairs, crossed the little tiled entrance-hall, and paused outside the door of the closed room. My heart beat fast and thick and a creeping chill stirred the roots of my hair as I stood in the hush of the sleeping house, listening—to what?

The voice of Léonie Lestelle. Faint and aerial as the notes of an *Æolian* harp; near, yet distant; sweet beyond words, but unutterably sad, it thrilled through the silence, breathing with tender, passionate entreaty: "*Ah, per pietà non dirmi addio!*" I forgot to feel afraid; I forgot even to wonder, as I listened with suspended breath to those

entrancing notes, and when they ceased I stood, as if spell-bound, longing to hear more of the sweet, unearthly music.

At length, when the silence had lasted some moments, I ventured to open the door. The room was dark and empty, the piano closed. As I stood on the threshold looking round, I felt a touch on my arm, and turning with a start, found Underwood at my side. He had been watching me unperceived. He beckoned me into the other room and closed the door before he spoke. His face was flushed; his eyes glittering with excitement, and a strange sort of triumph.

"You have heard it at last!" he breathed. "You know now that the sound is no 'delusion.' It is *her voice* that follows me night and day. Oh, my lady, my queen," he broke off, "why do you haunt me? What is it you want of me? If you would but speak instead of mocking me with those sweet piteous songs of yours ——"

He sank on to a chair near the table, burying his face in his hands.

I set down the lamp and took a seat at his side. "When did you first hear it?" I asked, involuntarily speaking in a whisper. He looked up, pushing back the disordered hair from his forehead.

"Last summer. The first time it was but a faint thin sound, like a distant echo, but every day it grew clearer and nearer, seeming to float in the air around me. It is not only in the house that I hear it, but out of doors in broad daylight, as if she were flitting about the garden singing to herself as she used to do. Sometimes she calls me—'Jacques, Jacques!' and her sweet, low laugh sounds so close that I can't help turning, half expecting to see her at my side."

I shuddered. "I wonder you have kept your senses!" I exclaimed.

"Do you think I am afraid of it? No—her voice is still to me what it always was, the sweetest sound on this side of heaven. It is only in spring and summer, during the months she lived here, that I hear it," he continued. "It ceases at midnight on the first of September; breaking off in the middle of a song—the very song she was singing when—when it happened."

I glanced at his face, and something I saw there confirmed a suspicion which had already occurred to me.

"Underwood," I said suddenly, leaning forward with my arms on the table; "can you honestly assure me that you do not know or suspect who took her life?"

He looked at me fixedly a moment, then answered, in a tone of curious composure: "I have known all along."

I drew back, and stared at him.

"Then, why in heaven's name did you not speak at the time?"

"My lips were sealed by a promise."

"Given to whom? Who bound you to silence?"

"*She* did, with her last breath, that fatal night, when I found her, lying in the moonlight, with her life ebbing away from the cruel wound. She saw in my face that I guessed who had struck the blow, and with all the strength that was left in her she implored—commanded me never to tell. It was her husband—for she was married, though the world did not know it. I have kept the secret so far, but I feel that if I don't share it with someone, I shall go mad in earnest. It is eating my heart away. I dare not break my vow, but you shall know the truth."

"From whom? How shall I know it—and when?"

He rose and pushed back his chair, pointed over his shoulder, then bent his lips to my ear.

"Watch with me in that room on the night of the first of September, and you shall learn the secret."

Before I could speak again, he was gone.

### III.

THE last week of August was stormy and wet. Summer took flight hurriedly, scared by the wild gales and heavy rain which stripped the branches and laid the flowers low. The green arcades of the park were dank and dripping; the sunny glades, forlorn; the avenues carpeted with fallen leaves, and the little river, transformed from a stream to a torrent, had overflowed its banks, inundating the lower end of the Cedars lawn, and carrying away the hand-rails, and some planks of the bridge.

The tempestuous weather culminated on the first of September. From dawn till dark the wind blew and the rain fell "as they would never weary;" but in spite of both, I was abroad all the afternoon, being in a restless, excited mood which would not allow me to remain between four walls.

The light of a stormy sunset was fading into dusk when I returned through the park, tired and wet, after a long tramp through miry country lanes. As I emerged from the plantation which bordered the stream, I was surprised to see Sir Philip Ranstone, who was standing on the bank, near the bridge. Buttoned up in his ulster he leaned against a tree, smoking, in serene indifference to wind and rain, with a large black retriever at his feet.

The dog started up as I approached, barking violently, and Sir Philip turned.

"Ah! good evening, Mr.—a—Wilford," he said, coming towards me. "Awful weather, isn't it? But I see you defy the elements, like myself."

"I was tired of staying indoors," I explained.

"I should think so; you must be bored to extinction in that dull hole, with no company but your own."

"I am fond of my own company," I said, smiling. "I am never bored when alone."

He glanced at me with languid curiosity. "Really. H'm—I can't say as much. I think in your place I should be ready to fraternise with Underwood—bear as he is—in default of other society."

"Underwood and I are very good friends, Sir Philip. I find he improves on acquaintance."

"There is room for improvement," was his comment. "By the way," he continued, knocking the ash from his cigar, "I should very much like to know whether he is the author of an absurd report which has only lately reached my ears—that The Cedars is haunted. It struck me that it might be an ingenious device of his to keep tenants away."

I shook my head. "I am quite sure that he has never told—I mean that he has never spread such a report."

He turned and looked at me. "You seem to think there is some truth in it," he remarked.

I felt no inclination to take him into my confidence, and stooped to stroke his dog without replying.

"Am I to conclude from your silence that you do?" he persisted, with an ironical smile. "Come, Mr. Wilford, you don't mean to tell me that you, a man of the world, and a lawyer to boot, actually believe in ghosts?"

I hesitated a moment, then looked up. "I believe in the evidence of my own senses," I said quietly.

"You excite my curiosity," he sneered. "What uncanny thing have you seen, I wonder?"

"I have seen nothing; it is a sound which haunts the house."

"A sound?" he repeated, with a quick change of tone. "What sort of sound?"

"A voice," I said, slowly. "The voice of the ill-fated girl who met her death beneath its roof."

The cigar fell from his hand. "Good heavens!" he breathed. "What do you mean? It is not ——"

"Yes, Sir Philip; it is the voice of Léonie Lestelle. I have heard her singing as plainly as I heard you speak just then."

He looked at me blankly, the colour fading from his face, and his dark eyes dilating till they seemed all pupil. Recovering himself, however, he stooped to pick up his cigar, and burst into a scornful laugh.

"Preposterous! you must have been dreaming, or else it is some trick of Underwood's."

"Could Underwood imitate such a voice as hers? Besides—he has heard it himself. It has haunted him for the last two years."

Sir Philip drew in his lips, and was silent a moment. "That is strange," he said, at length. "Why should it haunt him, of all

people, unless—" he glanced at me significantly—"unless there is some foundation for the suspicion which still clings to him."

"I am quite sure there is none," I answered, warmly.

"Other people do not share your conviction," was his reply. "It is because no one in the neighbourhood would give him the shelter of a roof that I have allowed him to remain at the cottage. However, he will soon have to find fresh quarters, for I am determined to have the house pulled down. Haunted or not, it is a gloomy, ill-omened place."

And, indeed, it looked so at this moment, with the shadows of the stormy twilight gathering round it, and a white mist rising, wraith-like, from the stream. He stared at it moodily, pulling the long ends of his moustache. "Where did you hear the—the sound?" he asked, after a pause. "In what part of the house?"

"In the room where the tragedy occurred."

He shivered slightly, and threw away his half-smoked cigar.

"The probability is that you had been thinking of that horrible affair, and imagination did the rest. As to Underwood, everyone knows he is half-mad. Anyhow, you will oblige me by keeping the story to yourself. I will wish you good evening now," he continued, glancing at his watch; "or, rather, good-bye, for I am going abroad in a few days, and shall probably not see you again."

He bowed without offering me his hand, whistled to his dog, and walked away.

Dusk deepened into dark, and the wind instead of subsiding, seemed to increase in violence as the night advanced. The fierce, fitful gusts came sweeping down upon the house, as if bent on unroofing it; now swelling to a roar which made the walls vibrate, then dying away in a long eerie wail. Towards midnight the rain ceased, and the clouds, rent and scattered by the wind, drifted apart like fragments of a torn veil, leaving a space of clear, violet-dark sky, in which the moon rode serenely. Her light touched the brimming stream with silver, and flecked the lawn with fantastic shadows of the tossing trees, giving something of wild poetry to the scene.

Underwood and I were in the second hour of our strange vigil, which so far, had been uninterrupted. I sat near the window; my companion on a low chair at the farther end of the room, his elbows on his knees, his forehead resting on his hands; both of us silent and motionless. The room was unlighted, and both door and window were shut. The atmosphere was close and heavy, and at length, feeling suffocated, I rose and opened the long window, admitting a rush of chill, damp air.

I stood for a moment looking out at the wild night, and as I glanced towards the bridge, I thought I distinguished a man's figure in the act of crossing it—a figure which, even at that distance, seemed familiar. And yet—what could bring Sir Philip to the place at this

untimely hour? I was still straining my eyes through the shadows, when a movement of my companion made me turn hastily from the window. The moonlight showed me that he had risen, and stood grasping the back of his chair, gazing with a look of awe-struck expectation towards the door.

My heart began to throb with the same mysterious dread which I had experienced before. As I held my breath to listen, a faint rustling sound struck my ear, like the soft "frou-frou" of a woman's dress. It crossed the room from the door to the piano, passing close to me—so close, that I involuntarily drew back, thrilling in every nerve.

There was a pause, filled by wailing wind and rushing water, then—near to us, yet immeasurably distant, like a divine echo from another world, the solemn, spiritual voice arose.

This time both words and music were English, and there was a ring of passionate pain in its tone which brought the tears to my eyes as I listened.

All the anguish of a breaking heart seemed to find expression in "The Song of Love and Death."

" Sweet is true love, tho' given in vain, in vain ;  
And sweet is death, who puts an end to pain :  
I know not which is sweeter, no, not I."

In the interval after the first verse I caught the sound of footsteps approaching up the gravel walk, and presently, a figure appeared at the window, darkly outlined against the moonlit background.

I had not been mistaken ; it was Sir Philip. Underwood, whose head was turned towards the piano, did not notice the visitor, nor did the latter appear to perceive that the room was occupied. After a moment's hesitation, he pushed back the lace curtains and noiselessly entered—or was about to enter ; but, in the very act of crossing the threshold, he stopped short and recoiled, for at the same moment the song was resumed :

" Love, art thou sweet ? then bitter death must be :  
Love, thou art bitter ? sweet is death to me.  
Oh Love, if death be sweeter ——"

There was a sudden break ; a quick, short, gasping cry. Involuntarily I glanced towards the watcher at the window. He stood as if turned to stone, and his face, livid in the moonlight, looked like a mask of fear.

There was a silence of several moments—silence within and without, for the fitful wind was hushed. The voice sank to a broken, inarticulate murmur, and died away in a long, shuddering sigh. Then all was still. After a moment, Underwood passed his hand over his eyes, then turned to speak to me. But at the same instant he caught sight of Sir Philip, and, with a hoarse cry of mingled rage and triumph, sprang forwards to the window, and seized him by the throat.

"Villain ! traitor ! murderer !" he uttered, in a breathless tone of concentrated passion. "I have spared you too long. By heaven, you shall not escape me now !"

Startled by the unexpected attack, Sir Philip staggered backwards and would have fallen, if he had not caught at one of the rustic pillars of the verandah. Recovering himself, however, he shook off his assailant, and casting a wild, panic-stricken glance around, darted across the lawn. The gardener hurried in pursuit, and I mechanically followed, feeling as if all the events of the night were part of a wild and troubled dream.

In spite of his lameness, Underwood gained on the other, and was close behind him when he reached the gate. Sir Philip quickened his pace and hurried over the bridge. But when half-way across it, his foot caught in one of the loose planks ; he stumbled, put out his hand blindly in search of the missing rail, lost his balance, and fell headlong into the deepest part of the stream.

I uttered a cry of dismay, and dashed on to the bridge, where Underwood was standing, his dark hair disordered by the wind, staring blankly down at the spot where the baronet had disappeared.

The latter rose to the surface some yards below the bridge, struggling helplessly against the headstrong current. The moonlight gleamed for a moment on his white face, showing the look of terror and anguish imprinted on it—a look which haunts me still.

"Underwood !" he gasped ; "you can swim—help ! save me."

For all reply, the gardener deliberately folded his arms, looking down at him with a dreadful smile.

"Surely you will not let him drown before your eyes !" I exclaimed ; "remember, vengeance is not yours. Save him ——"

"Not if I could do it by lifting a finger," was his stern reply.

I said no more, perceiving that my words would have no more effect on him than the wind which was raving above our heads. I turned, and was hurrying away, in the faint hope of being able to give aid from the bank, when, without otherwise changing his position, he put out a hand and grasped my wrist, holding it as in a vice.

"Stay where you are," he said, in a stern imperative undertone.

"It is just that he should perish—a life for a life !"

But even as the words passed his lips, his grasp suddenly relaxed ; he dropped my wrist and stepped back a pace from me. Glancing at his face I saw in it a change so extraordinary that it arrested my attention even in the midst of my excitement.

He was gazing intently at something in the space between us ; something which was visible to himself alone, for to me there seemed only air and moonlight. What did he see ? What was it that brought that look of mingled awe and rapture to his dark face, transfiguring every feature ? He gazed steadily for a moment, then bowed his head as if in assent.



"So be it, dear angel," he whispered; "I will do your bidding—if it is not too late."

Without another word he threw off his coat and plunged into the stream. A few vigorous strokes brought him to the spot where the baronet had sunk for a second time. He dived, and presently reappeared supporting him with one muscular arm, while with the other he struck out for the bank. But his movements were impeded by Sir Philip, who clung to him with the convulsive energy of a drowning man.

"If you value your life, loose my arms! How can I swim, hampered like this?" I heard Underwood cry, as the swift current swept them on past a turn of the stream. I hurried along the bank, but it was some moments before I caught sight of them again. The gardener was still struggling in a desperate but ineffectual effort to shake off the frantic clasp which was dragging them both under water.

As I stood watching them with breathless anxiety, a passing cloud veiled the moon, and for a moment blotted out the scene. In that brief interval of darkness a wild despairing cry rose above the rushing of the river and the roaring of the wind. When the moon looked forth again they had sunk to rise no more.

The bodies of the two men, still closely locked together, were found, entangled in water-weeds, some yards lower down the stream. The account I gave of the accident was confirmed by the condition of the bridge, and my statement that Underwood had perished in endeavouring to save his master, caused a complete revulsion of feeling towards the gardener, who having been shunned as a criminal during his life-time, was honoured as a hero after his death.

What brought Sir Philip to the cottage that night remained a mystery to all but myself. Immediately after the inquest I returned to town, feeling no inclination to remain in a place haunted by such terrible associations. I have never revisited Ranstone, nor until now have I ever disclosed what I know concerning the beautiful but ill-fated tenant of The Cedars.

